

Anti-poverty duo gain ally in York

By Chris Traber

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York Region anti-poverty advocates, supporters and those they help were in a celebratory mood following their turn on the community and health services committee agenda Wednesday.

Poverty Action for Change Coalition chairperson Tom Pearson and York Region Food Network co-ordinator Yvonne Kelly earned support for their co-convened Behind The Masks — Testimonials From Those Marginalized By Income report.

The York-specific study was compiled last year, following four months of social audits and public forums, including input from regional social service agencies and at-risk residents. The duo's hard work did not go unnoticed by committee chairperson Jack Heath and his colleagues.

York politicians agreed to endorse the report's recommendations and promote it to Ontario.

"We're very happy," Mr. Pearson said moments after the buoyant entourage posed for photographs outside chambers to commemorate the milestone. "They've accepted it. That was the ask. The fact that it was endorsed means they've gone over it. Everyone's on board."

"We couldn't have hoped for a better result."

Ms Kelly, who collaborated in the impassioned deputation on the plight of the region's poor, agreed.

"We can work with that," she said. "It's an important first step."

The pioneering study advocates for a fair, accessible and accountable social assistance system, Mr. Pearson told council. Its intent was to capture and share true-life experiences of those struggling with poverty, hunger and homelessness.

The report, the first Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition Social Audit in York Region since the organization was founded in 1986, identified key themes. These include inadequate income, housing, transportation, programs and services and health. All must be addressed toward the development of a workable poverty reduction strategy, Mr. Pearson said.

Core priorities, the presenters said, include advocating for adequate income with a focus on a monthly \$100 healthy food supplement for all adults on social assistance. Indexed social assistance rates that reflect the true cost of living and include the poor in community-based planning and poverty reduction strategies were also among recommendations.

The presentation and report was deemed an excellent process to keep awareness high for a largely hidden issue, Newmarket Regional Councillor John Taylor said.

"People on this committee asked to be on it," York Region chairperson Bill Fisch said. "York is perceived as an affluent region to a degree, but many don't have or share those comforts. The committee appreciates the efforts of Tom and Yvonne."

A copy of the social audit will be sent to the Association of Municipalities of Ontario, the Ontario Municipal Social Services Association and the Minister of Community and Social Services.